

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 5826

INFO AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 COLOMBO 3518

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT,CE

SUBJECT: GENERAL ELECTIONS: IF AND WHEN

REF: COLOMBO 3272 (NOTAL)

1.SUMMARY. RULING PARTY M.P.'S AND MINISTERS ARE ENGAGED IN A PUBLIC CAMPAIGN TO CONVINCE PRIME MINISTER BANDARANAIKE TO POSPONE GENERAL ELECTIONS DUE BY NEXT YEAR, OUT OF A CONCERN THAT THEIR SRI LANKA FREEDOM PARTY (SLFP) WOULD BE DEFEATED. ALTHOUGH THE PRIME MINISTER HAS PLEDGED THAT ELECTIONS WILL BE HELD, POLITICAL OBSERVERS HERE FEEL THAT SHE MAY BE SWAYED BY HER COLLEGUES' ARGUMENTS. POSTPONEMENT, WHICH COULD BE ACCOMPLISHED LEGALLY BY CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT EXTENDING THE LIFE OF THE ASSEMBLY BEYOND MAY 22, 1977, WOULD FURTHER POLARIZE POLITICAL DEBATE IN SRI LANKA AND INFLAME THE OPPOTITION. EVEN IF THE PM DECIDES TO PURSUE THIS COURSE, SHE MAY NOT BE ABLE TO ROUND UP THE VOTES. WE JUDGE THAT U. S. INTERESTS WOULD BEST BE SERVED BY SRI LANKA'S CONTINUED ADHERENCE TO THE DEMOCRATIC TRADITION OF REGULARLY-SCHEDULED ELECTIONS. END SUMMARY.

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2. AN INTERESTING AND INCREASINGLY MORE PROMINENT FEATURE OF THE SRI LANKAN POLITICAL SCENE RECENTLY HAS BEEN THE CAMPAIGN WITHIN THE RULING SLFP TO POSTPONE ELECTIONS BEYOND NEXT YEAR'S CONSTITUTIONAL DEADLINE. SLFP MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT AND A GROWING NUMBER OF MINISTERS HAVE PUBLICLY QUESTIONED THE NECESSITY OR WISDOM OF HOLDING ELECTIONS AS SCHEDULED. THEY ARE URGING PRIME MINISTER BANDARANAIKE TO FOLLOW THE PATH OF HER SISTER TO THE NORTH, INDIRA GANDHI, AND AS THEY PUT IT, SOLVE THE ECONOMIC PROBLEMS OF THE COUNTRY BEFORE TURNING THE COUNTRY'S ENERGIES TO PARTISAN POLITICS.

3. IF THE PM WERE TO FOLLOW THEIR ADVICE,SHE WOULD BE BREAKING A LONG POST-INDEPENDENCE TRADITION OF REGULAR ELECTIONS IN WHICH THE GOVERNMENT HAS ALTER-NATED BETWEEN THE TWO MAIN POLITICAL PARTIES. UNDER THE PROVISIONS OF THE PRESENT CONSTITUTION, ADOPTED IN 1972, THE NATIONAL STATE ASSEMBLY WILL CEASE TO EXIST ON MAY 22, 1977, IF NOT DISSOLVED PREVIOUSLY. ELECTIONS ARE REQUIRED WITHIN FOUR MONTHS OF MAY 22 (OR THE DATE OF DISSOLUTION, IF EARLIER). THE PM IS ON RECORD THAT THIS CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISION WILL BE HONORED. WHEN SHE FACED PRESSURE FOR AN IMMEDIATE ELECTION IN APRIL 1975, SHE PLEDGED THAT HER GOVERNMENT WOULD CONTINUE UNTIL THE DEADLINE (MAY 22, 1977) BUT NOT A DAY LONGER. MORE RECENTLY, SHE WAS PRESSED BY OPPOSITION LEADERS FOR A PLEDGE ON THE FLOOR OF THE ASSEMBLY THAT SHE WOULD HOLD ELECTIONS AS SCHEDULED.

SHE REPLIED,IN EARLY JULY 1976, NOT IN THE ASSEMBLY BUT IN A LETTER TO THE LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION, STRESSING THAT SHE HAS REPEATEDLY SAID THAT ELECTIONS WOULD BE HELD AND ADDING THAT "THE LAW PREVAILING WILL BE FOLLOWED."

4. THE CAMPAIGN AMONG BACKBENCHERS AND MINISTERS TO CHANGE HER MIND ARISES FROM THEIR FEAR THAT VOTERS, UNHAPPY OVER RISING PROCES, LOWERED PRODUCTION, AND CONTINUING ECONOMIC MALAISE, WILL DEMONSTRATE THEIR DISPLEASURE IN THE TRADITIONAL CEYLONESE WAY BY VOTING CONFIDENTIAL

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OUT THE RULING PACKY. (ALTHOUGH THE SLFP WON A RECENT BY-ELECTION IN MULKIRIGALA (REFTEL), WHERE THE PARTY HAS ALWAYS BEEN STRONG, THE GENERAL TREND OF BY-ELECTIONS HAS BEEN SOLIDLY ANTI-SLFP.)

5. THE PUBLIC RATIONALES OFFERED FOR POSTPONEMENT HAVE BEEN ON A SLIGHTLY HIGHER PLANE.THE AGRICULTURE MINISTER, NECTOR KOBBEKADUWA, HAS TOLD PARTY MEETINGS

THAT "THE PEOPLE" DO NOT WANT ELECTIONS AND THAT THEREFORE THEY SHOULD BE POSTPONED. INDEED THE MOST PROMINENT SLOGAN SHOUTED AT PARTY RALLIES, ON MAY DAY AND MORE RECENTLY AT THE SLFP'S 25TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION (SEPTEMBER 2, 1976), HAS BEEN "NO ELECTION IN '77." ANOTHER VARIANT COMES FROM AN INFLUENTIAL PROPONENT OF POSTPONEMENT, MINISTER OF FINANCE AND JUSTICE FELIX R. DIAS BANDARANAIKE, WHO ARGUES THAT A CHANGE OF GOVERNMENT IS DETRIMENTAL TO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT BECAUSE OF THE TIME WASTED IN PARTISAN POLITICS, RESTAFFING, ETC. IN A SPEECH SEPTEMBER 5, HE LAMENTED THIS WASTE AND HINTED THAT A CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT WOULD BE AN ACCEPTABLE METHOD OF POSTPONING ELECTIONS. BUT, HE POINTED OUT, UNITED FRONT STRENGTH IN THE ASSEMBLY AMOUNTS TO ONLY 102 MP'S, THREE SHORT OF THE NECESSARY TWO-THIRDS MAJORITY. IN FACT, EVEN A FEW SLFP MEMBERS HAVE MADE IT CLEAR THAT THEY WOULD NOT SUPPORT A CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT EXTENDING THE LIFE OF THE ASSEMBLY.

6. OTHER EXCUSES FOR POSTPONEMENT BEING OFFERED BY WORRIED SLFP BACKBENCHERS INCLUDE SUCH ARGUMENTS AS "OUR 1970 MANIFESTO PROMISED A SOCIALIST SOCIETY. WE CANNOT GO TO THE VOTERS UNTIL WE ACHIEVE IT" OR "THE NON-ALIGNED WORLD HAS ELECTED THE P.M. AS ITS HEAD FOR THREE YEARS; WE ARE THEREFORE OBLIGATED TO KEEP HER IN OFFICE FOR THAT TERM." THE P.M. HAS GIVEN SOME SUPPORT TO THE LATTER VIEW, ARGUING THAT THE NON-ALIGNED MOVEMENT WOULD NOT ACCEPT J.R. JAYEWARDENE AS ITS LEADER (PROMPTING J.R.'S COMMENT THAT, IF IT WERE WITHIN HIS POWER, HE WOULD BE HAPPY TO LEAVE THE CONFIDENTIAL

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LEADERSHIP OF THE THIRD WORLD TO MRS. BANDARANAIKE FOREVER IF HE COULD LEAD SRI LANKA.)

7. MANY HERE ARGUE THAT THE PM COULD EVENTUALLY BE SWAYED BY THE PROSPECT OF LOSING POWER TO FOLLOW HER COLLEAGUES' ADVICE AND POSTPONE ELECTIONS. SUCH A DECISION COULD HAVE SEVERE DOMESTIC CONSEQUENCES. THE CONSEQUENCES MIGHT BE MITIGATED BUT NOT ELIMINATED BY FINDING A CONSTITUTIONAL PATH TO THIS END. WHATEVER THE MEANS, IN THE MINDS OF THE OPPOSITION, THE MORAL LEGITIMACY OF HER GOVERNMENT WOULD BE LACKING.

8. SOME TAMIL DISSIDENTS IN THE NORTHERN AND EASTERN AREAS OF THE ISLAND ARE EVEN NOW IN SEMI-OPEN REVOLT

AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT. ANYTHING WHICH MIGHT THROW THE GOVERNMENT'S VALIDITY INTO QUESTION COULD ONLY INFLAME THE RADICALS AND ATTRACT MANY TAMIL MODERATES WHO HAVE, SO FAR, KEPT ALOOF FROM THE SEPARATIST MOVEMENT.

9. THE GOVERNMENT'S PARLIAMENTARY OPPOSITION WOULD ALSO OBJECT VEHEMENTLY. THE LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION, J.R.JAYEWARDENE,HAS DECLARED THAT "I PERSONALLY TAKE THE RESPONSIBILITY OF OVERTHROWING THE PRESENT GOVERNMENT IF IT CONTINUES TO BE IN POWER AFTER MAY 22, 1977". THE OPPOSITION LANKA SAMA SAMAJA PARTY (LSSP) WOULD HAVE ANY ISSUE ON WHICH TO MOBILIZE ITS LARGE URBAN TRADE UNIONS,RELATIVELY QUIET SINCE THE LSSP DEPARTED THE UNITED FRONT IN 1975. LSSP M.P.

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